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ABSTRACT

A behavior contract is a tool that many teachers and school staff use to successfully control or modify the behavior of students. In such a contract, behavior that the teacher wants the student to achieve as well as the actions that the student promises to perform to achieve the desired behavior are stated in writing. There are many types of behavior contracts. Several examples are described in this bulletin. (Author)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin 7

Behavior Contracts: Written Commitments

Summary

A behavior contract is a tool that many teachers and school staff use to successfully control or modify the behavior of students. In such a contract, behavior that the teacher wants the student to achieve as well as the actions that the student promises to perform to achieve the desired behavior are stated in writing. There are many types of behavior contracts. Several examples are described in this bulletin.

The Problem

Although students, teachers, and parents are consciously striving to achieve similar objectives in any educational system, communication is often poor and objectives remain unclear. Students sometimes may not understand exactly what is required. Parents sometimes have a great deal of trouble finding exactly what the problems are.

Teachers sometimes have difficulty focusing their attention on specific problems they have with students. For example, they tend to think in generalized terms about the student (James is a rotten kid) rather than in terms of a specific behavior problem (James comes to class ten minutes late and takes everyone's attention away from the lesson).

When specific behaviors are unacceptable to the teacher and/or staff, clear communications are needed so that effective changes can be made.

The Solution

Behavior contracts are one way to clearly articulate desired forms of behavior for students as well as teachers and parents. This technique, an offshoot of the positive reward system, is advocated by William Glasser and Fitzburg Dodson, educators who dealt with adolescent behavior problems in school systems throughout the United States. The behavior contract is effective for both teachers and students because--

- The contract is a mututal agreement resulting from give and take on both sides
- The negotiation process results in a commitment by both sides
- The agreement is written down in detail.

If a behavior contract is to be successful, it must be--

- Concrete and specific--the contract's desired results need to be observable and accountable
- Positive in nature--students need to agree to do something rather than agree not to do something
- Both parties need to feel they have made a good deal
- Made rationally, not emotionally.

Additionally--

- Each person involved should state just what the difficulty is without denigrating the other person
- Teachers need to develop a list of payoffs that genuinely interest the students or students can make these listing themselves.

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Example: John B. Hood School, Dallas, Texas

The John B. Hood School in Dallas, Texas uses behavior contracts as one approach to school discipline. At the beginning of the school year, parents, teachers, and students are asked to sign written documents committing themselves to objectives involving--

- Attendance
- Communication between teachers, parents, and students
- Provision of study time
- Respect for the rights and feelings of others
- A generally positive attitude about the school.

There are three basic pledges, one for students, one for teachers, and one for parents. Samples are provided in Appendix A.

Although signing the contracts is not legally binding, it has symbolic and psychological value, and assists communication between students, teachers, and parents by succinctly articulating many of the fundamental values of the school. Parents and students often feel that by signing the contracts they have affirmed these values. The principal works through the PTA and teacher leaders to get every teacher, parent, and student committed to these goals early in the school year.

These written commitments are part of a larger program called "Because I Care," a theme which is used to motivate many kinds of behavior, including depositing litter in wastepaper baskets.

The success rate with these behavior contracts has been high, largely because they were tailored specificallly to the needs of the Hood School's students, parents, and staff. Special attention was given to the concerns of the minority members of the school community while the pledges were being developed. The common religious background of the white, black, and hispanic populations in Dallas makes all groups comfortable with the idea of pledging and witnessing their support of moral ideals. The sense of community is further increased by the fact that teachers and parents sign pledges as well as students, and almost all do choose to sign the pledges.

At the Hood School this type of behavior contract has been a useful tool for improving the sense of community and raising morale.

Example: Headrest Youth Services Bureau, Modesto, California

Headrest Youth Services Bureau in Modesto, California, uses behavior contracts for those young people who wish to obtain work permits. Bureau clientele include youth with a variety of problems, many are runaways, or have severe drug abuse problems.

In California, work permits must be obtained by anyone under 18 who is not a high school graduate who wants to work. The only organizations issuing work permits in California are the schools, and no one is eligible unless he or she is a full-time student. To qualify as a full-time student, he or she must attend classes for at least four hours per week. Headrest made arrangements with the Unified Public School District in Ceres, California, to provide classes for Headrest youth and required that its youth sign a standard behavior contract stipulating they will attend classes for the necessary four hours per week. The behavior contract serves to communicate the exact and inflexible requirements of State law to the students. They are enabled to clearly understand that if they choose to cut classes, they are not fulfilling the minimum legal requirements to maintain a work permit and will thereby lose their permit.

Mike Herron, Director of Headrest Youth Services Bureau, reports he also uses behavior contracts with students when their behavior is interferring with their jobs. For example, if the student is coming to work late or using drugs while on the job, a behavior contract is drawn up specifying the objectionable behavior and the student plans to eliminate it.

Example: Wilde Lake High School, Columbia, Maryland

Wilde Lake High School in Columbia, Maryland, has gained nationwide attention for the success it has had with its "Contract Room." Instead of out-of-school suspensions for such actions as unexcused absences or smoking in an unauthorized area, students are sent to the Contract Room.

When this happens, students must begin working on behavior contracts. The first task they must perform is to write down what their problem is. Why they have been sent to the Contract Room. This is a communication tool by which teachers determine if students know why they have been sent to the Contract Room so that any mistaken notions can be corrected. After the students identify their problems; they decide what to do to correct it. Finally, they write a behavior contract stipulating the corrective steps they agree to take. Ninety percent of the students sent to the Contract Room require only one day to write a behavior contract and return to their regular classes. A maximum of three days stay is allowed for the Contract Room. Appendix B contains the rules for the Contract Room as well as a sample letter to parents and the plan sheet for students.

The majority benefits of this system are that both punishment and uncertainty on the part of students as to why their behavior is unacceptable are avoided. Students understand clearly why they are in the Contract Room and what they have to do to get out and stay out. The Contract Room has helped Wilde Lake High School maintain the lowest rate of out-of-school suspensions in their county.

Results

Behavior contracts aid communication among students, parents, and teachers by clearly articulating desired forms of behavior. Too often teachers may over-react to student misbehavior incidents. Behavior contracts are a tool to clearly define the limits of punishment and to establish standards of behavior for students.

Replication Issues

Behavior contracts can be used in any school. Although they are not the "ultimate answer" to behavior problems, they are helpful tools in many situations.

Required Resources

The major required resource is staff time to prepare the documents and discuss them with the students. The cost of duplication for the documents is minor. However, some inservice training should be provided to staff before implementing a program using behavior contracts. Outside consultants, who may have a valuable, fresh perspective, should provide this training when possible.

References

Glasser, William. Schools Without Failure. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

For further information on this program, or to request direct technical assistance in implementing a similar program, contact the National Center or the Regional Center nearest you. NSRN technical assistance is available at no cost to requestors.

APPENDIX A

JOHN B. HOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL

DALLAS, TEXAS

"Because I Care" Plan

Teacher Pledge

WHEREAS, I understand that these students will spend the most important years of their life in school, and

WHEREAS, I want to help the Dallas Independent School District give the students the best possible education,

THEREFORE, I promise, agree, and pledge myself:

1. To see that I am on time to school and all meetings.
2. To see that I am as regular in school as possible.
3. To meet with and speak to my students' parents as many times as possible.
4. To send letters, messages, notes and telephone calls when needed.
5. To make sure that homework is provided when necessary and graded when given.
6. To communicate with my students about their progress or lack of progress.
7. To respect my students and to teach them to respect the rights and property of others.
8. To urge my students to be sensitive to the feelings of other people, both children and adults.
9. To urge my students to speak in a positive manner about school.

_____ Date

_____ Signed

Source: John B. Hood Middle School; Dallas, Texas

JOHN B. HOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL

DALLAS, TEXAS

"Because I Care" Plan

Parent Pledge

WHEREAS, I understand that my child will spend the most important years of his or her life in school, and

WHEREAS, I want to help the Dallas Independent School District give my child the best possible education,

THEREFORE, I promise, agree, and pledge myself:

1. To see that my child gets to school on time.

2. To see that my child goes to school every day.

3. To meet with and speak to my child's teachers as many times as possible.

4. To reply to all letters, messages, notes and telephone calls from the schools.

5. To make sure that my child has some quiet time for homework each evening with the TV turned off. This time will be agreed upon between myself and my child.

6. To speak with my child every day about what was done at school.

7. To urge my child to respect himself or herself and to respect the rights and property of others.

8. To urge my child to be sensitive to the feelings of other people, both children and adults.

9. To speak to my child in a positive manner about school.

_____ _____

Date Signed

JOHN B. HOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL

DALLAS, TEXAS

"Because I Care" Plan

Student Pledge

WHEREAS, I understand I will spend the most important years of my life in school,

THEREFORE, I promise, agree, and pledge myself:

1. To get to school and class on time.
2. To come to school every day.
3. To work with my teachers.
4. To take all letters, messages, and notes home to my parents.
5. To have some quiet time for homework each evening with the TV turned off.
6. To share with my parents about what was done at school.
7. To respect myself and to respect the rights and property of others.
8. To be sensitive to the feelings of other people, both students and adults.
9. To speak in a positive manner about school.

_____ Date

_____ Signed

APPENDIX B

Wilde Lake High School, Columbia, Maryland Contract Room

Rules

1. You must be seated before the bell rings.

2. There is absolutely no talking or any other form of disruption permitted.

3. You must complete a contract to improve behavior prior to working on any other assignment. If you need help with your contract, you must raise your hand. The contract must be approved first by the contract room supervisor and then by one of the administrators. It must include an acceptable plan (in proper form) for modifying the behavior which caused your assignment to the contract room. It must also include an acceptable statement of how you plan to spend your remaining time in the contract room. After your contract is completed and approved, you must work on class or home assignments.

4. You may not request permission to leave the room. The only exception is to keep an appointment with Mr. Matthews, Mrs. Bowen, or Dr. Tegarden for review and approval of contract. The appointment will have been arranged by the contract room supervisor.

5. You will eat lunch during "B" shift; 11:40-12:15.

6. You will be referred immediately to Mr. Matthews, Mrs. Bowen, or Dr. Tegarden, if you break any of these rules. The consequence for rule violation is an out-of-school suspension for a minimum of three (3) days.

7. You will receive a re-instatement card to be carried to each subject teacher for signature. You must return this card at 2:30pm. of the day you return to classes.

I have read and I understand the above rules and the consequences for not following them.

signed _____ Advisor _____ Date _____
(student)

1978/1979

Conferences:	Date	Time	Adm.
Entry			
Contract Approval			
Exit			

Counselor assigned _____

Source: Wilde Lake High School; Columbia, MD

5460 Trumpeter Road, Columbia, Maryland 21044

"a school that makes waves"

Wilde Lake High School

Sample Letter to Parent

January 1, 1978

Mr. and Mrs. John Doe
102 Main Street
Columbia MD 21044

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Doe:

This letter officially informs you that Jane has been assigned to our Contract Room at Wilde Lake High School for (reason) _____.
You and Jane should realize that this is used as an alternative to suspending students from school. Our staff devotes a significant amount of time and energy to making this alternative work. We feel it makes much more sense to work with Jane here rather than send her home.

Jane will have constant supervision during the time in the Contract Room and she will be expected to work productively during this time. If any of the Contract Room rules are violated during this period, an out-of-school suspension will automatically be imposed.

We are confident that we can effect the necessary attitude and behavior change in Jane to allow successful school participation. We appreciate your co-operation. If at any time we can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to call us at 730-5607.

R. Stephen Tegarden, Principal

Donald L. Matthews, Vice Principal

PLAN SHEET

Students are to follow the plan sheet outlined below to prepare all contracts.

_____ _____ _____

Student name Date Referring teacher

1. What did you do? _____

_____

2. How did it hurt you? your teacher? your class? _____

_____

3. Do you think you should do anything about it? _____

_____

4. What will you do about it? Make a very specific plan_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. What should be done if my plan does not work? _____

_____

_____

I will follow this plan

_____

Student signature

Signatures: Referring teacher _____

Contract Room Supervisor _____

Source: Wilde Lake High School; Columbia, MD